

IMAMBARAS AND MAJALISES

SOURCE FOR INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL DISCOURSE

A look at the history of the present form of majalises takes us right back to Sham where Bibi Zainab (s.a.) held the first majalis after being released from captivity. Her message was, what was later formalized by the saying of Imam Jaffer-As-Sadiq (a.s.) and Imam Mehdi (a.t.f.), “Every day is Ashura and every place is Kerbala”. In other words, always take the high road based on honesty, integrity and high principles and morals regardless of the circumstances.

This message is to be read in conjunction with one of Imam Hussein (a.s.)’s last messages, “It is better to die fighting for truth, than to live under an oppressive ruler”.

However, if we look further back into history, the first majalis (gathering) was held by none other than our beloved Prophet Muhammed Mustafa (s.a.w.) at his house when he invited members of his family to accept Islam.

Prior to that every prophet (a.s.) held majalis in one form or another. The message, if we were to put it very simply was, which was also the first message of our Prophet Muhammed (s.a.w.), “*Kulu laillah-ha-illAllah, tuflihu*”. i.e. “say there is no god but Allah, and you will prosper”.

When we look at this statement, it may seem to be quite simple and easy to make. However it is necessary to understand what it really means. It means that we have to be absorbed into the Oneness of Allah (s.w.t.). This is where all the challenges begin. This is where Shaytan comes in. Remember he has been given permission to approach us from behind, from the front and from the right and the left. The way to Allah, therefore, is from above and that is enough for our Creator gave us *akl*, which, if used the way it was meant to be, is more powerful than the four accesses given to our arch enemy, the Shaytan.

Then Allah sent prophets. The first human being created was a prophet. This way, if ever anybody complained that although Allah gave him/her *akl*, there was no guide, the claim can be refuted.

Gradually, more and more prophets came. According to Islamic belief, 124,000 of them. The last was the Rasool for the entire universe. After him, it was the Imams – twelve of them – who discharged the responsibility. While the 12th one of the holy Imams, Imam Mehdi (a.t.f.), is in occultation, his functions are to be carried out by the *Ulama*. Many of them are doing this reasonably well. The shias who have been persecuted all along would not have survived had these ulama not been there.

These ulama, like the Imams and the Prophet (p.b.u.t.) before them, used the minbar to convey the message of Islam. They still do. Increasingly the minbar is being used to carry out the function of azadari of Imam Hussein (a.s.), which is important. As stated

earlier, such first majalis was held by Bibi Zainab (s.a.). What was the purpose? Was it only a call for pity in the way Imam Hussein (a.s.) was martyred? Most definitely not. It was a call for the muslims to be vigilant. It was a call to the muslims to be the true souls of Islam. It was to remind the muslims that the majalis was a platform for education, in the same manner as it was in the time of Prophet Muhammed (saw). Her call was to tell us that if the minbar is not given its due respect, it will be abused as it was by Muawiya and his descendants. The call was to be vigilant.

Let us examine how the minbar has been used by our maullanas and zakirs.

Unfortunately, the pith of our majalises have been rituals rather than substance. It is not enough to make a bland statement that Islam is a way of life and leave at that. What is important is to explain and expound upon that statement and to convince the congregant by giving concrete and practical examples of the manner in which Islam is the way of life.

Various ethnic groups are formed because some people feel that the minbar must be used to serve their needs rather than Islam. The Arabs must have their majalis in Arabic, the Iranians and Afghanis in Farsi, the Indo-Pakistanis (including Khojas) in Urdu or Gujrati and so on. What about the new converts? It does not matter if those Arabs, Iranians, Afghanis, Indo-Pakistanis and the converts cannot understand what is being said from the minbar. They will earn thawab. It does not matter, if the different tribes and nations, created for the purpose of understanding each other, are not provided an opportunity through a language commonly understood, to do so. The rituals must prevail. Imam Hussein (a.s.)'s sacrifice can be reduced to rituals. That is enough!!!

Rituals have become our religion. A majlis is not complete unless there is 'nyaz'. The reason? Well, when Prophet Muhammed (saw) invited the people of Mecca to accept Islam, he offered them a meal. Dear brothers and sisters, we are not being invited to accept Islam. We are and have been of the flock for generations. If the meal is for convenience it is fine, but if it has to be given religious significance, then let us do it right. Invite non-shias to our programs and provide our guests with decent meals before or after a lecture that will explain to them our view point. This way, the minbar can be used to guide the unguided. But to do so would be anathema for the traditional maullana. He will not be invited again to preach. This is taboo topic for the minbar.

The other manner in which the minbar tends to be used is to make attacks on individuals, groups, beliefs and practices adopted by others.

Sometimes the people who make these attacks know what they are doing. They feel threatened by the opposition. The so called opposition wants to say the things as they are and propose solutions. These are not acceptable to the traditionalists. It is not good for the rituals established by our forefathers. The beliefs of the ancestors must be protected even if they are wrongly but honestly held.

Imam Ali (a.s.) has said, “God has sent down the prophets, one after the other, to seek and demand the fulfillment of the covenant that He has entrusted to the intuition of men, the covenant not concluded verbally nor recorded on paper. Rather, that covenant which is registered in the hearts, in the deepest station of man’s essence and intuition”.

The very first revelation was “Read in the name of your Lord and cherisher who created man, out of a mere clot of congealed blood. Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful. He Who taught (the use of) the Pen – taught man that which he knew not (Al’Alaq 1-5).”

The covenant is to serve none but Allah and one of the reasons to ‘read’ is to reflect. How do we do it? We use aql, we seek the assistance of an aalim. These aalims are the ones who use the minbar. Therefore they have assumed great responsibility. If they use the minbar the way it is supposed to be, then we should have no problems. Unfortunately, the minbar is less and less being used for enlightenment. It is more and more used for entertainment in the form of polemic diatribe. This is easy. For the maullana does not have to do research. Repeat what was said previously, but this time in a different style. But those who come prepared and challenge the system get into trouble for they are talking about “Living Islam”. They are the ones who wish to awaken the sleepy system.

We are told that in Toronto Canada, at least one person becomes a muslim a day. There is active tabligh undertaken by our Sunni brothers. In fact in a Masajid known to us, tabligh is carried on every alternate Friday. Amongst us, a small group of brothers with extremely limited resources carries out the work in peoples’ homes! With the wealth of majalis mechanism and the facility of imambaras, we do not find it necessary to get involved! This will not be in keeping with our established traditions! Perhaps there is a lesson to be learnt by us western muslims from the Bilal Muslim Missions of Africa.

A message from the minbar can change the whole life style of a muslim. This is particularly so for the shias. We rightfully claim to be on the right path. The one who is right has more responsibility. In matter of religion, it is not proper to adopt the attitude, “since I am right, I do not care about the ones who have not understood the message. They can be ridiculed. They can be told off.” This is how the minbar tends to be used these days.

It was not many years ago that the non-shias used to fully participate in our programs, especially during Muharam. The non-muslims had faith in Imam Hussein (a.s.) and Hazrat Abbas (a.s.). They used to do nazr in their names and used to fulfill them in Muharam. We no longer see them. Where are they? Have we driven them away by irresponsible outbursts from our minbars?

Muharam is the peak period for the shias to do tabligh so that Islam is understood the way it should. But rather than concentrating on the substance of the message of Islam, we resign ourselves into carrying out the rituals because there is “thawab” in it. As Imam Ali (a.s.) has said, we tend to be like the merchants who do their ibadat not because of love for Allah but to gain the jannah.

What can be done? A lot. However to do it, we have to revisit our practices and re-think. Is the minbar being used the way it should be? The answer is an emphatic NO. How then can this be changed? Let us look back into history and compare our practices with those of our Aimmah (a.s.). Let us compare our approach to that of the muslims of the past.

We have an excellent machinery in place to do tabligh, not so much to convert as to let the non-shias know what we truly are. Our Imambaras should have practical programs for both ourselves and the non-shias. They should be invited and informed about us. Statistics show that 20% of the muslim population in the world is Shia. This is not good enough. Since we are on the madhab of the Ahlul Bayt, the percentage has got to be higher. This can be achieved with systematic approach. This is where those who have the privilege of access to the minbar carry high responsibility.

How pleasing to the ears is the slogan, “Muslims united never shall be defeated”. The following are some practical examples of muslims acting the spirit of unity:

- i) Janabe Fatima (a.s.) in one of her sermons has said that the main function of al-Imamah was unity of ummah.
- ii) Imam Jaffer-As-Sadiq (a.s.) advised his shia to offer prayers with ahl-suhbah, to visit sick persons among them, and to attend their marriage ceremonies because no worship pleases Allah more than this act of demonstrating solidarity with muslims.
- iii) Imam Ali (a.s.) did not let the issue of caliphate create disunity within the Ummah but instead let it pass and even cooperated with the caliphs on numerous occasions.

The ultimate aim of every muslim should be to fulfill the command of Allah (s.w.t.) who has said, “Do not be divided and hold on to the rope of Allah all together” (Holy Quran). If fulfillment of Allah’s command is what we cherish, we will immediately think of using the imambara and minbar in a different fashion altogether.

We are so much engrossed in the rituals that we have lost the practicality of Islam. We often find that when a wiladat/wafat is on a weekday, and we know it for a fact that more people will be able to come on the weekend, we insist on holding the program on the weekday. The maulana, through the minbar can educate and tell us that it is in order to hold the majalis on a weekend. Some of the other shia communities that we know of in Toronto, i.e. the Afghanis, the Iranians, the Lebanese and the Iraqis do exactly as is being suggested here. We are not even sure of many of the important dates including exact date of birth of our beloved Prophet. Was it 12th or 17th of Rabi-ul-Awwal? Was Imam Hassan (a.s.) martyred on 7th or 28th Safar?

The traditional format of the majlis has got to be changed. The mullah delivers his lecture in a monologue. There is no opportunity to question him. The subject is never known in advance. Opportunity should be afforded to the congregants to ask the zakir

questions on his majalis so that matters not understood can be clarified. The questions could be in written form to avoid long winded query. Next, as we get used to this idea, through the newsletters or answering service, the broad outline of the topic for the majalis could be announced in advance. This will provide opportunity to those who are keen in studying the subject before attendance. Majalises can have practical themes such as the approach of a momeen to a tragedy when it strikes his family. What should be done in those circumstances? Are there any support groups which he can turn to in his effort to face the tragedy? How should he handle the issue of his daughter marrying a non-muslim or his suddenly discovering that his son is gay? Issues such as euthanasia, artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization, or abortion, are hardly, if ever, discussed from the minbar.

Nor need all majalises be recited by a maullana or from the minbar. Experts on various subjects can be invited to deliver lectures on areas of their expertise from a lecturer. Debates on issues of the day can be arranged with speakers chosen so that the occasion enlightens as well as entertains.

The role of women in Islam is something that needs to be elaborated upon, not according to the traditionally accepted mould but taking into account the modern day reality and her increased responsibility as a daughter, a wife, a mother and sustainer and an economic partner and provider of the family. Should men continue to make decisions for them or should have an equal say and participation in all our decisions making process.

We note from the annual reports of Jamaats that there is apathy in the communities. The minbar can be used to tell us that it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to be the representatives of the Imam and if there are not enough people doing it, the rest are not absolved. It has to be emphasized to the congregation that the various roles that have to be played by the shias cannot be sacrificed for lack of workers. If the work does not get done because of lack of volunteers every member of the community is responsible for the non-fulfillment of the task. This can include tabligh – a very important function, especially now that we are under constant media attack. We are also being attacked by anti propaganda either through malice or ignorance.

The majlis is a great inheritance that we have received in which we can learn to enrich ourselves even in tragedy. Imam Hussein (a.s.) never reminded the enemy that he had given them water even as the enemy was holding back water from him. In this is a lesson of height of humility that humanity is capable of.

We started this paper with two quotes – one from the 6th and the 12th Imams and the other from Imam Hussein (a.s.). As a rule, every saying of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) is full of wisdom. If we were to cling to and follow even one saying to the fullest, the shape of Islam would be totally different. It will be as dynamic as it was meant to be. These two sayings are vital from the point of view of amr-bil-maruf.

Every day is Ashura. This is a message which tells us that we have to be vigilant at all times. We have to be concerned regarding all calamities that may befall humanity. Who

of us expressed concern about Rwanda except for loss of material wealth by members of our Shia community? This loss was most definitely a great loss for the loss of a momin is a loss for the ummah. But did we really care for the nearly half a million innocent people who got killed? We doubt it very much for we are not aware of any minbar or imambara having expressed concern. Where was the spirit of Ashura?

Every place is Kerbala. This is to tell us that the Shias will raise their voice against tyranny. What sort of voice have we raised regarding Bosnia? What role has the imambara played? The Chief Of The Martyrs has said that it is better to die fighting for the truth. What have we done? Did any majlis in the last Muharram tell us our role in dealing with the media attack on Islam. There is no dying involved here. All it takes is to remember that “every day is Ashura and every place is Kerbala”, i.e. be vigilant and active.

At least some concerned individuals in Toronto, thank God, took the initiatives to get the muslims together to organize a conference for the muslims and non-muslims to make them aware of what is happening in Bosnia and what solidarity the muslims should show.

The vigilance can include involvement in local politics. It is very well known that politicians are interested in getting re-elected and if they believe that their election is dependent on the muslim vote, they will side with the muslims. For a practical example, let us consider the political situation in India. The muslims there decided to abandon Congress. What happened? Congress is out. If they get more united and get actively involved in politics, the oppression that they are facing in India will dramatically go down. For the Indian politicians will then be actively interested in the muslim vote and will actively support promotion of muslim well being.

How active are we? A case in point is Toronto. A Shia brother was certain that if our community supported him, he could have been elected. Non-muslims supported him but we did not. We did not believe him. We were not willing to give him a chance. We did not have time to go and vote at his nomination meeting. The result? He lost the nomination by less than 150 votes. In the walkover election, most of the Liberal candidates got elected. He could have been elected if our support of him would have resulted in his being nominated as a candidate. But we did not believe in being vigilant.

From the practical point of view, both the majalis and the imambara can also be used for social occasions. We know that the youths of community are its future leaders and torch-bearers and it is important that they grow up in the community in an atmosphere that will build in them love, respect and regard for the community. One way of achieving this is to cater to their needs and activities of our youths. Sports is favored by most youths. Let us re-equip our imambaras to provide sporting and recreational facilities within the means of the community.

We, in the west live in what we regard as an amoral society. In some cases like Toronto, Canada, for instance, the Board of Education is actively involved in promoting the notion that homosexuality is a way of life. This has to be countered. The minbar should provide

enough materials to combat this notion. This imambara can also be used to be the launching pad for opposing this twisted thinking on the part of the so called intellectuals running the education system.

Unemployment in the West currently is on the rise. The imambara can be used to launch youth clubs with a view to making the young adults in the community entrepreneurs. Schemes can be devised whereby Karde-hasna is given for business purposes. This has effectively been used in Iran and Karachi. Market research and feasibility studies can be carried out and joint ventures set up. This can be done in co-operation with JIBA if it is willing to get involved. A living community is one that is educationally and financially well-off.

Children of the community should be encouraged to get together in religious atmosphere of the imambaras. On the one hand we complain that our youngsters are drifting away from the community and marrying outside but on the other hand we create hinderance in their way. Gone are the days of marriages taking place by viewing photographs! Let us wake-up and provide the necessary facilities within the bounds of sharia. It is appalling to hear the leaders of the community say, “that although it is clearly permissible from the point of view of sharia to allow both male and female who are in proper hijab to be in the same hall without partitions but I will not allow it”.

Imambaras can also provide following additional services and facilities:

1. Day care centers during summer holidays.
2. Physical fitness and social services for the seniors.
3. Education of women to play the role of mothers. To quote from an old adage, “teach a child and you teach an individual; teach a mother and you teach a whole nation”.
4. Encourage use by special interest groups such as development of hobbies, indoor sports activities, evening classes.
5. Hold exhibitions on Islamic art and calligraphy, career counselling sessions and business, and product exhibitions.
6. Promote girl guides and boy scouts movements.
7. Interfaith dialogues and visits to the mosques/imambaras by students from various secular and denominational schools.
8. Hold special majalis for children of tender years at the same time as other regular majalises are held.

As a community, we have received several benefits from the society we live in. The time has come for us to give something back to the society. Blood donations on the day of Ashura should be encouraged, food banks could be organized in the month of Ramadhan, volunteer services may be offered in such programs as telethons for sick children etc. We could join search parties for lost children and individuals.

All these aspects bring us back to the minbar/aalim. The aalim has got to be well informed in matters of religion, the dynamics of the society in which we reside and the techniques of communication.

We would like to state that the success of the imambara is how the members of the congregation react on hearing the word "Majlis". If the response is like that of the butterfly heading towards the candle to be lost in its flame, then the majalis has not been understood. If the response is "Oh! Again?" then there is something seriously wrong. But if the response is, "Thee do we worship and from Thee only we seek guidance" then the imambara has succeeded. The minbar has succeeded. The Aalim has succeeded. Islam has found another mujaheed.

Let there be literature produced from the imambaras. Let there be lectures for the general muslims who are ill-informed about us. Let there be programs for non-muslims so that they may understand al-Islam and not islam as depicted by the media.

And let our character, our action our outlook and our attitude be such that no media would dare to malign Islam simply because no one believe them from our proven character that followers of such a great faith can be capable of such deeds.

Our Prophet Muhammed (s.a.w.) has said, "call mankind towards goodness not just by words but by your deeds, truthfulness and virtue". This should be our ultimate aim. Where else but from the minbar can we be taught this?

Wasalaam Alaykum

By: Nazmul Damji
Ghulam Abbas Sajan
Bashir Versi
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.